

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

UNTOUCHABLE CASTES

Mala

(An untouchable caste)

Madiga

(An untouchable caste)

564

The above table does not include the Panch Bramha group. In point of religion they are Hindus, but their position in the caste hierarchy is rather uncertain. This group comprises five divisions: The Wadla (carpenter), the Kammari (blacksmith), the Ausula (goldsmith), the Kase (carver of figures in wood and stone) and the Kanchari (worker in bell-metal). Of these only the first three sections are found in Shamirpet. Inter-dining and inter-marrying, these sections constitute a distinct group of their own. In the local caste hierarchy they should be placed below the Kapu-Kummari-Golla group, but it cannot be said that they rank equal to or below the Sale-Gaondla group.

Among Hindus the Brahmin holds the highest place. He officiates at the ceremonies of all castes, except those of the Vaddar, the Erkala, the Pichha-Kuntla, the Mala and the Madiga. However, he is consulted by these castes also regarding the auspicious timing of agricultural operations or to perform marriage ceremonies; and his astrological calculations are eagerly sought by all people. All castes, except the Panch Bramha group, will accept food at his hands, but being 'pure and high-born' he cannot accept food from the hands of any but his caste fellows.

The Komtis rank next to the Brahmins. They are mostly traders and money-lenders, keeping small shops where they sell grain and general provisions. All castes except the Brahmin and the Panch Bramha group accept food at their hands, but they do not take food from those castes whose social position is lower than their own, and thus can only accept food at the hands of the Brahmins.

The Reddi sections of the Kapu (agricultural) group, the Kummari and the Golla castes are of equal caste status. Although each is an endogamous caste, they will freely inter-dine with each other, and social contact between them is on a basis of equality. The position of the other Kapu section, viz. Muttarasi, is a little lower. The first Kapu section as well as the Golla will eat at their hands, but the Kummari will refuse food which they have touched.

On the next level are the Sale and the Gaondla, who enjoy a

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

- 564 more or less similar position but are both endogamous and do not
 • 264 inter-dine. They accept food at the hands of the castes higher than
 582 themselves but not from those which are lower. Similarly, the Sakali and the Mangali have a similar caste status, but they do not inter-marry or inter-dine. But again, both the Sakali and the Mangali will dine with the Sale and the Gaondla and all the other castes higher than themselves. The Vaddar and the Pichha-Kuntla will eat with neither the Sakali and the Mangali nor with the untouchable Malas and Madigas, but they can take food at the hands of all castes higher than themselves. The Erkalas will eat from the hands of all castes except those of the Mala and the Madiga. The Sakali and the Mangali do not accept food from the Erkala. The Erkala and the Pichha-Kuntla will accept food from the Vaddar, but the Vaddar will not accept food from the Erkala and the Pichha-Kuntla. Finally, the Mala and the Madiga will eat at the hands of all the higher castes, but the Mala, considering himself superior of the two untouchable castes, will refuse food touched by a Madiga.

The position of the Panch Bramha group is peculiar. They constitute a consolidated and self-sufficient group. They do not accept food at the hands of any other castes, nor do any other castes accept food touched by them. Here the position differs vitally from that found in north India, where the carpenter, the blacksmith, the worker in bell-metal, the goldsmith and the carver of images constitute different endogamous castes which do not, as they do in this area, inter-marry and inter-dine. Their social status is neither very high nor very low. Everywhere they rank lower than the 'twice-born' *varnas* of Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, but they are not regarded as impure and their status is infinitely superior to that of the untouchables. In the area under study while the Panch Bramha group is regarded as 'clean', even the untouchable Mala would refuse food touched by them, and it is only in recent years that the Madigas have started to eat from their hands. 'Their very touch poisons the food. How can we accept it?' the people are often heard to remark when they are asked to explain their refusal of food touched by any of the Panch Bramha castes. The Panch Bramha castes wear the sacred thread of the twice born and refuse food even from the Brahmin. It is probable that their social exclusiveness reflects an attitude which was developed in ancient times when a great fusion of Aryan and

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

non-Aryan groups was taking place in Indian society and Hinduism was consolidating itself. The highly organized craftsmen's guilds of those days may perhaps have succeeded in maintaining their integrity and exclusiveness for a long time, but had ultimately to yield; yet the tension created by their resistance remained, and even when they were absorbed into the fold of Hindu society they were not admitted as equals to the groups of comparable social status and in consequence probably continued to maintain their age-long exclusiveness.

All the castes whose relative positions in the caste-hierarchy have been shown in the accompanying table are endogamous. There is a permanent social distance between them; the individual is born into a caste, and a subsequent change in status is, except to the very lowest strata of society, equally impossible upwards or downwards.¹ In general it may be said that people accept food at the hands of all castes occupying a higher level in this hierarchy, the only exception being that of the Vaddar, who do not accept food from the highly placed Sakali and Margali. Without exception people on a higher level refuse food from those on a lower level. Each caste has a traditional occupation sanctioned by religion, and these monopolies should not be infringed upon, except in the case of agriculture, which all may pursue.

Mention should here be made of the Jangam and the Katike castes, of each of which there is one family in Shamirpet. The Jangam are a semi-priestly caste ritually attached to the Baljas, for whom they tie the 'lingam'—a phallic symbol representing Shiva—and function as priests on the occasion of weddings. On the days of *Pitra Moksha Amavasya*² and *Shivaratri*,³ they visit Hindu houses, particularly of those peasants who follow the Shaivite⁴

¹ When a person is excommunicated or out-casted he is not down-graded and pushed into a lower caste; he is merely denied the privileges of equal participation in the socio-religious life of the community.

² The night of the New Moon in the Hindu month of Bhadrapada (August-September).

³ The day on which Shiva is believed to have drunk the world's poison, retaining it in his throat, and thereby saving mankind from possible harm from this poison.

⁴ Of the great gods of the Hindu 'trinity' Brahma is not worshipped because of his sinful infatuation for his own daughter, whilst Vishnu and Shiva are worshipped. Those who principally worship the former, usually in his incarnations as Rama and Krishna, are known as Vaishnava; those worshipping the latter as Shaiva or Shaivite. Cf. Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology* (London, 1950), pp. 56-59, 296-300, 360-362.

LEVELS OF LIVING

262 this supply is exhausted, very few vegetables are bought for everyday home consumption. Tender leaves of the tamarind tree are curried and pickled, and are popular with all sections of the community. The poorer people collect wild leafy vegetables; those who are better off buy brinjals, okra and unripe bananas. Tea and coffee are regarded as fashionable, and are regularly used by the rich people as well as those who are educated and who have [273] had some urban contacts. With the exception of the Brahmin and the Komti all castes permit the drinking of fermented palm-juice by men; in most of the lower castes women are also not denied its use. Some Muslims claim never to touch it as its use is not permitted by their religion; others drink it openly. A limited quantity of other liquor imported from the city is also consumed in the village.

Among the Hindus, the Brahmin and the Komti are vegetarians; and the eating of all kinds of meat, fish and eggs is forbidden to them. All the Hindu castes abstain from beef; although the Madiga untouchables are allowed to eat the carrion of cattle which they are expected to dispose of. The Muslims eat beef, but refuse pork. With the exception of the Erkalas and the Madigas, no other Hindu caste eats the domestic pig; wild pigs, of course, are regarded as a delicacy by all meat-eaters except the Muslims.

Milk and *ghee* (clarified butter) are greatly valued, but are difficult to get, and indeed very few people can claim to have them as a part of their everyday diet.

Very little fruit is eaten in the village. When in season, mangoes, guavas and *jamun* (*Eugenia jambolana*) are eaten by the people, more commonly by the children. The only fruit-bearing trees grown by them in their backyards are lime and drum-stick trees. Few people buy any fruit in the markets and shops of the city. Coconuts and bananas are bought for ceremonial occasions, and occasionally large varieties of mangoes too are bought from the shops.

[264] Those who can afford eat three times, others eat only twice daily. According to the seasons there are variations in the type of food and also in the time when the principal meals are eaten. The following menus will illustrate the kind of food eaten by families at different economic levels:

LEVELS OF LIVING

random sample of families covering all levels of living in the community was selected, and, following the universal weighing-method, every item of the diet was weighed correctly to an ounce in these families. The International Scale of Family Coefficients was used to calculate the number of consumption units in each family, and data was carefully analysed for working out the mean intake of diet per consumption unit and the intake of calories, proximate principles, minerals and vitamins. Simultaneously, a medical examination of all members of the families selected for the survey was also undertaken; in the course of which along with height and weight measurements a general clinical examination with special reference to abnormalities of hair, eyes, skin, lips, gums, tongue, and the peripheral nervous system was done. While a detailed summary of the above survey would be inappropriate in a sociological study, some of its main conclusions will not be out of place here:

(i) The picture of nutrition emerging from the survey gives room to believe that there is mild sub-nutrition in the 'rich' and 'well-to-do' families and mild malnutrition in the 'average' and 'poor' families.

(ii) There is a sub-clinical deficiency of thiamine, riboflavin and Vitamin A. Phrynoderma of the skin, cheilosis, multiple fissuring of the tongue, gingivitis, and xerosis of the conjunctivae are fairly common in the community; their incidence being greater on the lower strata. The use of un-milled, slightly home-pounded rice explains the lack of any gross Vitamin B¹ deficiency. It may partly be explained also by the consumption of fermented palm-juice in nearly all sections of the community.

(iii) The protein intake is slightly inadequate. This is more apparent in the families classed as average and poor. In the lower income brackets the intake of fats is also insufficient.

(iv) With the exception of venereal diseases and malaria which are evenly distributed in all levels of the society, the incidence of other diseases—particularly deficiency diseases—is much higher in the lower income groups.

As a rule menfolk eat first, women follow. Children are served as soon as the meals are cooked. Among men, it is expected that the elders as well as others occupying a higher position in the scale of kinship should be served first and younger members of the family should wait for their turn. But during the busy season, or

LEVELS OF LIVING

- 264 on all other occasions when exigencies of work demand it, the younger people can sit down to eat with the elders, and can even precede them. However, it is regarded as bad form for women to take their meals before the menfolk have eaten. In all the higher castes this would indeed be viewed very seriously, and a woman found to be indulging in anything like this would be ridiculed by the other family members. On the lowest strata of the society, occasional exceptions to this rule can be observed. There too it is regarded as impolite, but is nevertheless tolerated.